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Power dynamics in transdisciplinary research: from power over to power with?

Contributors

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Abstract

Transdisciplinary approaches have been developed with the expectation that the inclusion of practitioners and their expertise in research processes allows to co-produce societally relevant knowledge and leverage the transformative power of research. While some of the transformational goals associated with transdisciplinary research relate to developing ‘power to’ (e.g., empowerment of certain ideas or actors) or ‘power with’ (e.g., societal learning), the inclusion of diverse actors and knowledges does not necessarily lead to these desired outcomes. The design of the process and the context in which it is embedded affect how participants relate to it and how their values and expertise are reflected in it. Regarding process design, principles of transdisciplinary research stress the need for shared control of knowledge production and allude to the ideal of interactions on “equal footing”, hence implicitly to balanced power relations.

Yet, the role of power dynamics and imbalances in transdisciplinary practices has increasingly been acknowledged and the need for unfolding the entanglements of power and politics throughout such research processes has been recognised (Bréthaut et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2018; Schmidt and Neuburger, 2017; Bieluch et al., 2016; Fazey et al., 2013). An increasing number of scholars find that power relations among researchers (MacMynowski, 2007), between researchers and practitioners, and among practitioners shape participation processes in research (Marshall et al., 2018; Pohl et al., 2010). The integration of diverse knowledges has moreover called attention to the epistemologies of different knowledge systems and to varying degrees of trustworthiness, and authority ascribed to them in knowledge co-production processes (McKee et al., 2015; Schmidt and Neuburger, 2017).

Despite this wide acknowledgement that power dynamics pervade transdisciplinary processes, their role is hardly explored in greater detail. This session, thus, wants to contribute to shedding light on this lacuna by jointly reflecting on the diverse ways in which power can shape transdisciplinary processes, including potentially desired forms such as empowerment (‘power to’) or collective learning (‘power with’) as well as potentially undesired ones such as domination and control (‘power over’).

The aim of this session is to share experiences with both desired and undesired forms of power within transdisciplinary knowledge production processes as well as with useful methods for tackling them, thus building a practice-related knowledge base on the workings of power in transdisciplinary research. We invite both researchers and practitioners involved in

transdisciplinary research to contribute their reflections on experiences with power dynamics in transdisciplinary research projects.

Format:

(i) The session starts with short impulse talks in which presenters share their experiences with (tackling) situations of power in transdisciplinary processes (4-5 talks, 30 mins. in total), using a Pecha Kucha (format where the presenter shows 20 images/slides, each for 20 seconds; images advance automatically and the presenter talks along to the images);

(ii) The talks are followed by a structured discussion (see guiding questions below) among all session participants, using a world café format or similar (60 mins. In total).

Impulse talks:

Claudia, Binder: The input talk will highlight experiences with respect to power dimensions in different contexts in the developing and industrialized world based on her more than 15 years of experience in inter-and transdisciplinary research. It will address the following question: (i) what are unspoken power-relations and expectations in a developing country, industrialized country and industry context?

Olivier, Ejderyan: The micropolitics of power in TD research. This input talk will focus the micropolitics of power within TD processes. Micropolitics relate to the affects generated by the relationships between participants engaged in a TD process, for example: feeling committed to the objective of the TD process, being upset because one's option has been rejected by the group, being sympathetic to the perspective of a specific participant etc. By reflecting on TD projects in river management and energy infrastructure provision in Switzerland, I discuss how these micropolitics might influence how TD researchers deal with more obvious power relationships within TD processes (such as difference of interests, gender, or the socio-economic situation of participants).

Livia, Fritz: Tracing power relations in five sustainability research projects. This input talk will rely on a meta-analysis of five TD projects in the field of sustainability research. It will explore the sources and mechanisms of power in different phases of TD process and ask how power relations shaped the interactions of researcher and practitioners.

Flurina, Schneider and Isabelle Providoli: Power dynamics in different socio-political settings. This input talk with focus on experiences with power dynamics involved in doing transdisciplinary research in different socio-political settings: examples come from communist Lao with its one party system, (post-)conflict Myanmar in transition from authoritarian to democratic government, politically instable Madagascar with often absent government on the ground, and the politically stable Switzerland with its long tradition in direct democracy.

Theresa Tribaldos and Flurina Schneider: Emotions in group dynamics on equal footing. In our research project "Enhancing transformative research for sustainable development: mutual learning within research networks" we have a regular focus group for exchanging experiences and jointly reflecting on novel ideas for theories of change. Emotions in this group have a considerable impact on group dynamics and determine to a large degree if the outcome of the sessions are productive and fruitful. We would like to share some insights from this process and point out some ideas how to deal with such dynamics.

Guiding questions for the discussion:

- Recognising power: How and in which situations does power manifest in transdisciplinary research? Who exercises it?
- Understanding power: How to operationalise theories of power for the context of TD sustainability research?
- Tackling power: Which methods and tools allow for minimising undesired and maximising desired forms of power in transdisciplinary research?